

DHSS Commissioner Marla J. Montell

Montell adds right mix of ingredients to make Department of Human Support Services grow, thrive

Like all good gardeners, Marla Montell knows that the quality of what you produce is directly proportional to what you put into the process. Through personal and professional experience, Montell understands that, just as the right mix of soil, nutrients, water and sunshine is essential for a healthy, vigorous garden, producing and delivering effective, meaningful service depends on good leadership, continuous learning and the hard work and determination of people who feel valued and appreciated.

In May 2004 Governor Ernie Fletcher appointed Montell Commissioner of the Department of Human Support Services (DHSS), which includes the divisions of Child Abuse and Domestic Violence Services, Family Resource and Youth Services Centers and the Kentucky Commission on Community Volunteerism and Service.

Montell said she was delighted when difficulties she expected, with the creation of a new department composed of agencies that had never before worked together, did not materialize.

The department has "become a strong team of committed, talented men and women," Montell said. "Even though the issues our various divisions address and the populations we serve are fairly diverse, as a department, we are guided by one shared mission to treat the people we serve and each other with dignity and respect as we deliver the best possible services."

DHSS offers a wide range of programs and services that provide support and assistance to Kentuckians at all stages of their lives. From school children who overcome barriers to learning, to elders who realize an improved quality of life; from women and children who find help to end the cycle of family abuse and address health issues, to entire communities that benefit from the service of AmeriCorps members, the lives of countless Kentuckians are made safer, healthier and more secure through the work of DHSS.

"We have the opportunity to affect the lives of some of the most vulnerable citizens in Kentucky - from the very young to senior citizens," Montell said.

Undersecretary for Human Services, Mike Fields, said Montell brings a people-focused passion to her job. "Commissioner Montell set some impressive goals for herself and her department early on and she's made great progress toward achieving those goals," Fields said. "She's managed a big task with great poise and self assurance that she passes on to others. It's a pleasure to work with her."

Montell has a bachelor's degree in Health Care Administration from Western Kentucky University where she also attended graduate school. From 1998 to 2004 she held the position of Senior Hospital Territory Manager for Bristol-Myers Squibb

Company where she received numerous awards, including national recognition for high achievement.

She was also the long-term care Ombudsman for the Barren River region from 1983 to 1986 and has worked as an admissions coordinator and social service director for the Medco Center in Bowling Green.

Montell and her husband of almost 25 years, Brad, have two sons. Tyler, 19, is a freshman at the University of Kentucky, and Hunter, 14, is in eighth grade. The Montell family also includes three members of the canine persuasion: two Yorkshire terriers, Annie and Colby, and Jack, a Boxer-English Sheepdog mix.

Family has always been Montell's chief source of influence and inspiration.

"My children have taught me about mercy and unconditional love and my husband has been a constant, steady source of encouragement and confidence," she said. "My grandmother shared with me the gift of laughter – especially the ability to laugh at myself – and my parents encouraged me to set high standards and settle for nothing less than my very best. My dad has shown me by example the importance of treating others kindly and fairly – and to always have fun and work hard."

In addition to gardening, Montell said in her spare time she enjoys reading, listening to an eclectic variety of music, attending her sons' sports events and playing tennis and golf. Montell is also active in her church, where she mentors young adults and leads a Sunday morning class for high school seniors. She also holds a leadership position with the church's women's ministry team. Still, she said, "I enjoy most being with my family."

Montell said she looks forward to the personal and professional challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, which isn't surprising for someone who has a knack for finding the silver lining in every cloud and whose life philosophy is: "Life is an adventure. I choose to make it enjoyable."

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